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ABSTRACT

This study identifies and describes the difficulties faced by secondary school Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in Qinghai Province (China) in adopting the communicative approach to language instruction. It examines the perceptions of both teachers and teacher trainers. Data were drawn from semi-structured interviews with one trainer and five trainees following workshops on the communicative approach and from a program evaluation questionnaire completed by 19 participants (transcripts of both appended). Salient problems in implementing the communicative approach include: pressure of external examinations on both teachers and students; the textbook-centered nature of the uniform curriculum; problems inherent in ethnic minority education; the low status and poor motivation of teachers; teachers' distrust of educational administrators and their ideas; teachers' low levels of English proficiency; poor facilities; and the location of training sessions far from the province itself. It is concluded that the results provide a snapshot of English language education in Qinghai Province and the problems to be addressed in future teacher training programs. (Contains 73 references.) (MSE)

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The Difficulties and Challenges of Adopting the Communicative Approach in TEFL at Secondary Schools in Qinghai Province, China

By

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November 1997

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Signed: Mary McHugh **Date:** 1/5/1996

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Abstract

This study identifies and describes the difficulties and challenges faced by secondary school teachers of English in Qinghai Province in China in adopting the communicative approach in their classrooms. It examines the perceptions held by Qinghai teachers and some teacher trainers in this regard. In so doing, it is hoped that this study will provide a snapshot of ELT not only at secondary schools in Qinghai Province, but also those in other rural and minority areas in China. Thus the study may serve as a reference to similar teacher training programs in China in the future. The research findings may also offer a different perspective to the use of the communicative approach in English as a Foreign Language education. Furthermore, it is hoped that this study will provide some understanding into the needs and purposes, concerns and constraints of some EFL teachers and learners in the context of the demands and principles of the communicative approach.

Abbreviations:

ADB	The Asian Development Bank
BNU	Beijing Normal University
ELT	English language teaching
EMS	Experimental Middle School (affiliated to BNU)
ILs	International consultants
LLs	Local consultants
SEdC	State Education Commission (of the People's Republic of China)
QBEC	Qinghai Basic Education Commission
QIE	Qinghai Institute of Education
QNU	Qinghai Normal University

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The Difficulties and Challenges of Adopting the Communicative Approach in TEFL at Secondary Schools in Qinghai Province, China

Educational change depends on what teachers do and think - it's as simple and as complex as that.

Fullan (1991:117)

1 Introduction

This study was prompted by a five-week (July-August 1995) training program for selected middle school teachers from Qinghai Province in northwest China for which the author worked as a trainer. It intends to examine, through a pre-training visit to Qinghai, participant observation and reflections during the training and interviews with some trainers and trainees, the difficulties and challenges faced by Qinghai teachers in adopting the communicative approach in teaching English as a foreign language at secondary schools.

The communicative approach was first introduced to English language teaching at the tertiary level in China in the late 1970s. Since then, a great number of language teachers from English speaking countries have been working in China trying to use a more communicative approach. A few have written about their teaching experiences and the possibility of using the communicative approach in China (Barlow & Lowe, 1985; Grabe & Mahon, 1983, in Anderson 1993). However, most of these studies were done by American language teachers on ELT at Chinese universities (Anderson, 1993). Very few foreigners have worked at secondary levels, especially in a remote minority region such as Qinghai. Although international input in teacher-inservice training has produced reports on the actual training programs (Lai,1993), not much has been written about the process of English-as-a-foreign-language teaching and learning at secondary schools in China.

1.1 Purpose of study

This study intends to identify and describe the difficulties and challenges faced by secondary school teachers of English in Qinghai Province in adopting the communicative approach in their classrooms. It examines the perceptions held by Qinghai teachers and teacher trainers in this regard. In so doing, it is hoped that the study will provide a snapshot of ELT not only at secondary schools in Qinghai Province, but also those in other rural and minority areas in China. Thus the study may serve as a reference to similar teacher training programs in China in the future. The research findings may also offer a different perspective to the use of the communicative approach in English language education. Furthermore, it is hoped that this study will provide some understanding into the needs and purposes, concerns and constraints of some English language teachers and learners in the context of the demands and principles of the communicative approach. As Anderson(1993) put it,

> While the communicative approach may be the best way of training those from other language backgrounds here in the United States and the most efficient kind of training for those who need to be a part of our culture, it may not meet the needs of others in distant lands, who are learning English for a different purpose and who have no hope of ever visiting our country and no desire to adopt our culture (p.471).

It may or may not. We don't know, due to lack of empirical evidence either way. However, new understanding may stimulate new discussion and further explorations in the field of English language education. What this essay is most concerned with are the difficulties and challenges faced by Qinghai secondary school teachers in adopting a communicative approach in the English classroom.

1.2 Background to study

The training program was sponsored by the Asian Development Bank. It was the first phase of a three-stage project which includes training, study tours and the purchase of video and general equipment. The ADB Technical Assistance aims to contribute to China's national goal of expanding and improving the quality of middle school

education, particularly in the economically disadvantaged Qinghai Province on the remote Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau. More specifically, it aimed to

(i) enhance the capacity of the Experimental Middle School Affliated to Beijing Normal University (BNU-EMS) to train middle school teachers;
(ii) upgrade the quality of 5000 middle school teachers mainly from ethnic minority areas;
(iii) improve the technical skills of senior educators in curriculum development and education research for middle school teacher training;
(iv) strengthen the capacity of selected teacher training institutions in Qinghai Province;
(v) develop the capacity of the province to plan and implement large scale teacher in-service training programs (ADB, 1995a:2).

The first level of the program completed in August 1995 involved the training, in Beijing, of 100 master teachers from Qinghai Province, with 20 from each of the subject areas of English as a Second Language, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and Chinese. These teachers were to be trainers for the second level training in Qinghai. A Curriculum Development and Evaluation workshop was planned for education administrators (mainly school principals from Qinghai) but changed to school management to be relevant. Another workshop was conducted in Xining, the Capital of Qinghai, in Applied Education Research.

For English as a Second Language, the project requires that we introduce to the Qinghai teachers "the communicative approach to language teaching" and "the communicative and interactive approaches to learning" (ADB, 1995b:24; 27). The trainers also include an English language educator from Beijing Normal University(BNU), an co-editor/author of the new English textbooks and six teachers of English from the Experimental Middle School Attached to BNU (BNU-EMS).

BNU is a prestigious institute of teacher education that offers programs to the masters and doctoral levels. Established almost 100 years ago, it has a well qualified and widely respected staff. EMS, which has an enrolment of 1642 students and a full time

teaching staff of 97, is a key school that has gained a strong reputation for academic excellence since it was founded in 1917. It is used by the State Education Commission (SEdC) as a trial school for new curriculum and new teaching strategies. The school has long sought to develop its capacity to train teachers from disadvantaged regions in an attempt to share its experience and expertise with other regions to encourage sharing of resources and expertise between advanced and disadvantaged regions. The SEdC seeks to further the capacity of the BNU-EMS so that it will be able to contribute more effectively to the national effort to improve the quality of middle school teachers.

Staff of EMS played a lead role in the planning, presentation and administration of the Beijing teachers training workshops.

1. 3 Education in Qinghai Province

Qinghai, China's fourth largest in terms of area, is one of the poorest ethnic minority regions. It has 20 official "poverty counties" that are eligible to receive financial assistance from both the central and provincial governments. Qinghai's population is 4.6 million, about 42 percent of which belong to 44 ethnic minority groups including Hui, Mongolian and Tibetan.[1] The *China Daily* reported that at least 230,000 students from ethnic minority groups have been enrolled in 1500 schools in Qinghai which make up nearly a third of the schools in the whole province (*China Daily*, 3/8/95: 5).

Only 10 of Qinghai's 43 counties have achieved universal compulsory nine year basic education. Many schools that cater to the needs of ethnic minority students are boarding schools which have replaced the "tent and horse schools" that formally

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[1]. Unless otherwise stated, all statistics concerning Qinghai are contained in the "Background Information and Terms of Reference" provided by the State Education Commission of China and the Asian Development Bank for the 1995 project: T.A. NO.2269-PRC.

moved around with groups of nomadic herders. Despite these efforts only about 68% of ethnic minority children in the six autonomous minority prefectures are enrolled in primary school. In seven counties the primary school enrolment is less than 30%.

In China, the basic professional qualification for primary school teachers is completion of a three-year training program at the upper middle school level, for lower middle school teachers, a two or three year college diploma, and for upper middle school teachers, a four-year diploma equivalent to a bachelor degree. In 1993, about 85% of the 5.5 million primary teachers, 60% of the 2.6 million lower middle school teachers, and 51% of the 560,000 upper middle school teachers were qualified.

In Qinghai, about 79% of primary school teachers are qualified, while 52% of its lower middle school teachers and 39% of its upper middle school teachers, have the basic teaching diploma. Teachers without basic qualifications are particularly concentrated in counties in the livestock herding zone, where most minority prefectures are located.

The Chinese government has identified the following key issues are to be addressed in order to achieve the goal of nine year basic education and to improve the quality of education in general:

(1) Insufficient number of middle school teachers
(2) Lack of qualified teachers
(3) Inadequate training infrastructure
(4) shortage of funds
(5) Imbalance of subject specialisation
(6) Lack of modern methodologies
(7) Regional disparities (ADB, 1995a).

This training project addressed many of these issues. For the part of teaching English as a foreign language, introducing the communicative approach in language teaching was the focus.

1. 4 The Communicative Approach and ELT in China

Hymes was among the first to use the term *communicative competence* which states that "the ability to speak competently not only entails knowing the grammatical rules of a language, but also knowing what to say to whom in what circumstances and how to say it" (Hymes, 1972, 1974, in Scacella *et al.*:1990:XI). Communicative competence is about "the ability of language learners to interact with other speakers, to make meaning, as distinct from their ability to perform on discrete-point tests of grammatical knowledge" (Savignon, 1991:264). Models of communicative competence have since been advocated and generally accepted as the aim of language teaching and learning. As is well documented in the literature, this accordingly demands changes in teaching methodologies which saw the push for the communicative approach in the second and foreign language classrooms (McKay, 1994a).

The characteristics of the communicative approach is summarised as follows:

> (1)concentration on use and appropriateness rather than simply on language form, (2) a tendency to favour fluency-focused rather than simply accuracy-focused activities, (3) communicative tasks are achieved through the language rather than simply exercises on the language, (4) an emphasis is placed on student initiative and interaction, rather than simply on teacher-centred direction, (5) there will be an sensitivity to learners' differences rather than a "lockstep" approach, and (6) there is an awareness of variations in language use rather than simply attention to the language (Maley, 1984, in Anderson, 1993:471).

Despite neat definitions, "the communicative approach" in practice is very much a fluid though dynamic concept. It is open for different interpretations and applications by individual classroom teachers. Some theories underlying the approach are also questioned as to their pedagogical validity (Swan, 1985) and there have been claims that "teachers were generally confused about what exactly they should be doing" (McMeniman, 1985:9, in McKay, 1994:9a).

However, it is generally established that the communicative approach is one that emphasises "on real communication as both the goal and the means of reaching the goal" (Rollmann, 1994:221). It is a learner-centred approach. It focuses "on the learning process as essential features of the language classroom" (Scarino, *et al.* 1988a: 1). For the communicative approach, learning activities involve real communication, learning tasks are meaningful to the learner. The objectives of learning will reflect the needs of the learner. Learner's role is as negotiator and interactor of the communication process. Teacher's role is as facilitator of the communication process, a participant in activities, a needs analyst, counsellor and process manager (See, for example, Nunan, 1991a; Li, 1984). In short, it is a very democratic approach.

The communicative approach was first introduced to China by visiting scholars and lecturers in 1977 when China resumed inviting them from abroad to teach in Chinese universities after the Cultural Revolution. It is also known in China as the Functional Approach or Situational Approach. The approach "was enlightened by the visit of Professor L. G. Alexander who came in 1981 on a lecture tour to such places as Shanghai, Beijing and Xi'an, demonstrating the Situational Approach" (Yao, 1993:76). In Chinese higher education, new and communicative English textbooks and teaching materials were developed with the help of international expertise (Li, 1984). With more and more input from an increasing number of resident lecturers from English-speaking countries, the communicative approach has become more accepted in some aspects (usually listening and speaking skills) of English language teaching and learning at the tertiary level, especially for students who are majoring in English (Yao, 1993; Anderson, 1993).

Nevertheless, the constraints remain for the communicative approach. A top-down curriculum model at both tertiary and secondary levels and external examinations form the fundamentals of education in China. Furthermore, "translating" (and to a

much lesser degree, "interpreting") is understandably seen as important a skill as the normal four skills of communication in language learning and the development of reading skills enjoy more emphasis in the syllabus (Yao, 1993; SEdC, 1993). In such a context, the communicative approach is modified for more effective results (Liu, 1995; Ross, 1993). In China today, the "eclectic approach" is advocated (Ross, 1993; Yao, 1993; Paine, 1993). All methods - the grammar-translation, the audiolinguial, the direct method, total physical response and the situational and communicative, are used and defended at the tertiary level (Xu, 1993, Li, 1984).

At the secondary level, all these methods are incorporated into the English curriculum (Liu, 1995; SEdC, 1993). The new *Junior English for China and Senior English for China* adopted a more communicative approach with all four macro-skills of communication included. Accompanying tapes recorded by native English speakers were included as an integral part of the text materials. Both the *Students' Book*s and the *Workbooks* offer a wider rang of exercise from grammatical pattern drills to more interactive activities. The *Teachers' Book* offers very detailed lesson plans using more communicative methods. The junior schools have been using the books for three years and Senior One starts from September1996. From the view point of the SEdC of China, the ADB in-service training program under discussion was designed to help teachers use the new books.

1.5 Issues in China's top-down curriculum model

The Chinese secondary English curriculum follows the top-down model in that the State Education Commission of the People's Republic of China issues national syllabuses with prescriptions regarding the aims and principles of English language teaching/learning, its contents, approaches and evaluation methods. Uniform curriculum is adopted nationwide. As all aspects of the curriculum is prescribed in detail, it is possible that students from Shanghai to Tibet, from Inner-Mongolia to

Guangdong on the Hong Kong border recite the same English passage, doing the same sentence translation and taking the same tests on the same day. This uniformity is well documented (See for example, Hawkins, 1983; NOOSR, 1991; Ross, 1991 & 1992; Paine, 1992). The ultimate National Entrance Examinations for higher education take place during the first week of July each year. Just like the political and economic system, China's education structure and policies are centrally planned and controlled (NOOSR, 1991).

Only the top municipal key (elitist or priority) schools[2] are consulted in curriculum development (Ross, 1991). Key schools are mostly attended by selected students who have achieved the highest marks in the provincial and district based exams at the end of junior school. Keys, as they are called, are essentially college-preparatory and the best funded despite debate "about the social and political consequences of concentrating scarce resources in highly selective institutions". Their students are "singularly-directed and exam-bound" (Ross, 1991:72; Pepper, 1991; Epstein, 1991). In short, key schools are China's chosen and privileged and their role in curriculum development is summed up by Ross (1991):

> ... key schools dominate the creation and distribution of secondary school knowledge. Their best teachers are not only called upon to write and grade national examination test papers, they are publishing researchers who set the term of secondary school debate through their domination of district education bureau publications (p.72).

For a supposedly multi-ethnic, multilingual society such as China, with vast

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2. In China, " the formal school experience of a particular group of students, teachers and administrators in determined, more than ever since 1949, by its school's ranking in a school hierarchy that runs in descending order of power and privilige from municipal key secondary schools to technical and specialised secondary schools to vocational and regular academic schools"(Ross, 1991:71). However, the college- preparatory key schools and the regular academic schools share the same curricula (including English) and students from both groups take the same national examinations for further education.

differences in economy, cultural traditions and geography among provinces and between urban and rural areas, the uniform curriculum prescribed by the Central Government in Beijing inevitably leaves these regional differences and needs in education unaddressed. For the remote Qinghai Province, with its 44 ethnic groups living mostly in rural and herding areas, the specific difficulties and needs of their schools are neglected. The teachers and their students are severely disadvantaged in the schooling process with its gate-keeping exams. In this context, a learner-centred communicative approach is likely to be difficult to implement, if not completely out of the question.

A more communicative approach seems to be encouraged and discouraged at the same time in the new *Junior English Syllabus* (Pilot,1993) as it prescribes that

> the teaching and learning aims are, through the training of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing skills, to enable students to acquire a basic knowledge of English and the ability to use English for communication; to enthuse and motivate them to learn English and form a fine study habit in order to lay an initial foundation for further study; to enable students to gain education in areas of ideology, morality, patriotism and socialism; to help develop students' independence in thinking and learning (p.1).

In China, the meanings of such concepts as "ideology, morality, patriotism and socialism" are defined and fixed by the central government which is controlled by the Chinese Communist Party. In effect, the above statement encourages students to develop "independence in thinking and learning" and to adhere to Party doctrines at the same time. This inherent contradiction makes the democratic communicative approach with the learner as a negotiator of meaning and "an independent thinker" in the learning process seem both desirable and problematic for Chinese students. Looking back at the Chinese government's campaigns to crack down on "spiritual and cultural pollution" brought mainly by foreign knowledge, on "bourgeois liberalisation" and students' demonstrations against Communist Party corruption throughout the 1980s (Ross, 1992; Rosen, 1991), and considering the tight control the

Party still exercises over the state, one can only agree with Ross (1991) when she concludes that

> independent thinking is a pedagogical aim that the government encourages through its rhetoric. The educators who take it seriously in practice are now in the uncomfortable position of questioning the wisdom of such commitment (p.91).

2. The study

2.1 Methodology

This is a qualitative study with the training workshop as its focal point. As the study aims to identify and describe the difficulties and challenges faced by teachers in adopting a new teaching / learning methodology, it accordingly utilised an interpretive methodology. It took an ethnographic approach to data collection and interpretation in the field. Burns (1994) describes the approach as follows:

> Ethnography essentially involves descriptive data collection as the basis for interpretation; it represents a dynamic 'picture' of the way of life of some interacting social group. As a process, it is the science of cultural description (P.246).

> The purpose of ethnographic research in education is to uncover social, cultural, or normative patterns of the school (p.247)

Thus the approach was suitable in describing and illuminating perceptions held by the Qinghai teachers with regard to the use of the communicative approach in their own classrooms.

2.1.1 Subjects

Nineteen secondary school teachers of English from Qinghai Province and five from Yan'an, Shaanxi Province participated in the training workshops. The latter group was not planned in the ADB project and is not included in the study[3]. Among the

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[3]. Apparently, the participation of the Yan'an teachers was funded by the Bank of China.

nineteen Qinghai teachers, sixteen were from rural and herding areas, two were of Minority backgrounds (Tibetan and Muslim), six were female, six were four-year trained with a BA in English and one has spent a year teaching Chinese at a secondary school in the United States.

Three teachers were from Xining, the capital of Qinghai, two of whom were 4-year trained and working at key schools. The rest of the teachers were from county towns and rural/herding areas.

Nine trainers conducted the workshops. They included two local consultants from Beijing, one Australian consultant and six teachers of English from EMS.

2.1.2 Data Collection

Data were mainly obtained through semi-structured interviews with one trainer and five trainees both before and after the workshops, and through trainee responses to a program evaluation questionnaire. Transcripts of both are included in the appendices. Data were also collected through participant observation of the workshops, conversations with various EMS trainees, end of day reflections and fragmented diary entries, seminar discussions in Xining, and conversations with the two local consultants.

The questions (Appendix I) were prepared for both trainers and trainees for both before and after the workshop interviews. Questions for the pre-workshop interviews were mainly designed to elicit information about, and teachers' perceptions of, English language teaching methods, especially those using the communicative approach. Questions were also designed to draw out the expected outcomes of the training from perspective's of both trainers and trainees. Post-workshop interview questions concentrated on the evaluation of the workshops, with particular regard to

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Trainers had not been made aware of their attendance until the rollcall at the beginning of the workshops.

adopting the communicative approach in the Qinghai classrooms Questions were designed to identify discrepancies between what had been advocated in the training and the Qinghai school context, and to identify potential and perceived challenges to the application of the communicative approach by the Qinghai teachers.

The Program Evaluation Questionnaire (Appendix II) covered all curriculum areas included in the training. The design of the Questionnaire was a collaborated effort by all consultants in all curriculum areas.

The trainer interviewed both before and after the workshops was Head of English of the EMS and co-ordinator of the EMS training team. The interviews with him were quite comprehensive and his views were treated as representative of all trainers from the EMS. This treatment was justified through conversations with the other EMS trainers.

Altogether, five Qinghai teachers were interviewed. Three from rural areas were interviewed at the beginning of the workshops and two from urban (Xining) schools (one teaches at a key school) after the workshops. Interviewees' qualifications, levels f proficiency in English and their teaching experiences were representative of all nineteen trainees at the workshops.

Fragmented observation and end-of-day reflection notes and diary entries were kept through out the program and also used as a source of data collection. These data helped clarify and triangulate findings in the interviews and questionnaire responses.

2.1.3 The workshop

The five-week training program was conducted in three stages: (1) a three day tour of Qinghai; (2) a three-week workshop in Beijing; (3) evaluating and reporting of the program.

The three consultants travelled to Xining, the capital of Qinghai Province. A one-day seminar was conducted in Xining with attendants from Qinghai Normal University, Qinghai Institute of Education and Xining and Qinghai Education Commission. As it was during the summer holidays, only seven educators of English came to the seminar (it was planned for 20) and three could not attend as they had to work as interpreters for other subject areas such as mathematics and science. The seminar was small but proved very informative and fruitful for the consultants in terms of understanding the context of ELT at schools in Qinghai. Major issues emerged during discussions include the low status of teachers, lack of qualified teachers, bilingual education for ethnic minority students and how to teach the new English textbooks.

The second stage of the program was the three-week workshop that took place at EMS in Beijing. Of the nine trainers, the two local consultants (an associate) took 8% and 12% of workshop time respectively, the six teachers from the EMS conducted 65% of the training and the Australian consultant 15%.

The local consultants introduced theories and principles of English language teaching and learning, with an emphasis on the communicative approach. The co-author / editor of the new Junior and Senior English for China introduced the senior books and the communicative methodology in the Chinese context. The EMS teachers focused on the understanding of the curriculum content and demonstrated how to teach the textbooks, how to follow the steps prescribed in the *Teachers' Book*, how to do revision work, how to understand the syllabuses and how to prepare for examinations. The Australian consultant introduced the communicative approach focusing on the principles of the language learning outlined by Scarino, *et al.* (1988: Book 1:1) and demonstrated various methods using the approach.

The approaches adopted for the workshop included trainer lecturing, a bit of group work, demonstration lessons with EMS students, trial teaching by Qinghai teachers, video viewing and discussions.

3. Findings and Discussion of Results

3.1 Research findings

Many issues emerged in the transcripts of the interviews and responses to the evaluation questionnaire that affect teachers in adopting the communicative approach in the English classroom in Qinghai. Among them, the following are the most significant:

(1) the overwhelming pressure of external examinations on teachers and students

(2) uniform curriculum - the textbook-centredness

(3) ethnic minority education

(4) teachers' low status

(5) teachers' distrust of educational administrators and cadres

(6) teachers' low English language proficiency

(7) physical constraints

(8) the location of in-service training programs

3.2 Discussion of results

These above findings are verified through the other data sources. They are interrelated and pose as difficulties and challenges faced by secondary school English teachers in Qinghai in adopting the communicative approach. The findings are discussed in detail.

(1) The pressure of external examinations

The effect of national tertiary entrance examination on teaching and learning at schools in China is well documented (Hawkins, 1983; NOOSR, 1991; Ross, 1991 & 1992; Paine, 1992; Anderson, 1993). The examination is "criticised as an overly-centralised, pressure-laden, docility-provoking, and exclusionary device that effectively 'colonises' secondary education" (Ross, 1991:74). The pressure of examinations came out during the workshop and in the interviews as the predominant

challenge faced by teachers in adopting a communicative approach.

In China, these external exams serve the purposes of gatekeeping and merit selection and they are of paramount importance to teachers and their students. All external examinations are norm-referenced and competency based (Ross, 1991). Junior Three is the end of the nine-year compulsory and free education and students have to pass province-wide examinations in order to go to the senior school. At the end of Senior Three students first take district-based exams to graduate and those who pass are eligible to take the three-day National Entrance Examinations for tertiary education during the first week of July of each year. All these examinations are extremely competitive as the demand for places at senior schools and higher education institutions is high (NOOSR, 1991). Quite illustratively perhaps, the EMS - the training centre and where most of the trainers teach- is a key / priority school which is most lauded for being able to produce students who pass exams to key/priority universities in the country.

This situation has put tremendous amount of pressure on teachers to help their students pass exams so they can go on study at senior schools and universities. All teachers interviewed feel both pressure and responsibility to do so as passing exams means access to further education and the ensuing social advantages. Quite simply for most students, especially those in remote rural and herding areas such as in Qinghai, failure to pass means no access.

All teachers and the trainer interviewed point out that "ultimately, our aim is to achieve good results in the exams". Indeed, teachers' work is evaluated according to how many of their students pass the exams. One Junior school teacher said that in her county, "teachers get a bonus in direct proportion with the number of their students who pass exams to senior school, but you get a fine if none of your students passes". Another teacher said that teachers in her county "are entitled to an allowance

up to 20% of our salaries. But last year, our whole county didn't do well in the exams, so the County Education Bureau kept all our allowances".

Teachers, students, school authorities and parents are all forced to recognise that, in reality, passing exams is the single most important aim of schooling, despite whatever is stated in the syllabus. Thus teaching and learning for exams has become the "guiding principle" of school life. Both the EMS trainer and the Qinghai teachers talk about frantic coaching and preparation for exams in Junior and Senior Three at their respective schools:

> In Senor Three, especially during the last semester, everything is about coaching the students for exams. We do a lot of sample test papers, getting the students ready. Usually at Senior Three, there is no teaching method. What teaching method? We have to concentrate on sample exam papers... (trainer: Appendix II).

> Coaching for exams is very common in Qinghai. ... Senior school education is completely and totally about coaching students to pass exams. ... In order to produce good results in the National Entrance Exams at the end of the three years, some teachers start training (students to do exams) from Senior One. The coach their students to deal with the exam items one by one, the vocabulary one by one, the grammatical structures one by one. There is no teaching methodology (A trainee: Appendix II).

With passing competency-based national exams as the sole purpose for students and their teachers, the backwash effect (Biggs & Moore, 1993) determines that teachers have to be "exam-wise" and teaching and learning approaches and strategies are tailored to meet the demands of tests. As Biggs and Moore (1993) point out,

> where external examinations are important, teachers see it as their responsibility to package content that is likely to be tested and teach it in an expository fashion, requiring detailed note-taking by students and accurate reproduction of the content so taught (p. 393).

In the Qinghai secondary school context, the teaching and learning activities understandably focus on predicting exam items, closely studying and comparing past exam papers and working on sample papers. As one Qinghai teacher put it, the absolute focus on exams means "education for quality students is out of the

questions". Students are trained to be good at passing exams and some have been turned into "high marks and low ability students" (Ross, 1992). The general education for the vast majority of students who can never get into higher education institutions is neglected because of the exam-centred obsession. In this educational environment, a more learner-centred communicative approach with learners engaging in meaningful and interactive activities in learning English does not seem to have a place though it is sorely needed.

A further factor that prevents teachers from actively adopting a more communicative approach is the contents of the national exams. The English exams have mainly been on knowledge of the English language such verb tenses, sentence structures, punctuations, phonetics and reading and writing skills[4]. Listening and speaking as communication skills have never been tested. Thus the grammar-translation method has been very popular and effective in preparing for exams. As "we teach to the baton of the exams"(a trainee), the backwash effect leaves no room for a more communicative approach focusing on language use in all four skills of communication in class activities.

With the implementation of the more communicative new textbooks *Junior* and *Senior English for China*, and with the push for Listening as a macro-skill to be included in the national tertiary entrance exams from the year 1999, it is hoped that the backwash effect will then direct teachers to teach more communicatively (than in the past) by incorporating communicative listening activities. It probably will, ironically because of the importance of examinations in students and their teachers' lives. However, if it happens, it will be a "communicative approach" with strong Chinese characteristics, still somewhat passive and reactive, and markedly different

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4. In the 1995 national English examination, out of a possible 120 points, 60% was allocated for grammatical knowledge, 30% for reading comprehension, 15% for composition/writing using a given topic, 10% for vocabulary and 5% for phonetic knowledge.

from how it is defined and promoted in the realm of TESOL in the English-speaking world.

(2) The textbook-centredness

As a top-down and uniform curriculum is adopted, English examinations, as in other curriculum areas, are text-based (Ross, 1991; 1992). Hence teaching is text-driven and school textbooks are usually studied with attention to minute detail. Paine (1992), after observing and studying various teacher education programs in China, believes teaching in China focuses on "the centrality of texts and textual knowledge". She observes that

> teacher education college courses for the most part followed an approach to teaching that is text-centred; faculty lectured on the text, and students reproduced these interpretations in examinations. In discussions of teaching in education courses, there was direct reinforcement for this view. The teaching methods class, for example, is designed to help students "master the teaching materials, apply these teaching materials, and help the students master the basic function of each instructional segment" - in short, to help the students learn how to use the text (p.189).

"How to teach the textbooks" was exactly what the Qinghai teachers were anxious to know and have, to a large degree, learned from the workshops. The new *Junior* and *Senior English for China* are being implemented and the teachers wanted to be shown how to use them because examinations will be based on them. This concern is evident in both the interview transcripts and responses to the evaluation questionnaire (Appendices). As one teacher put it during the interview:

> We hope to learn some modern teaching methods. In Qinghai, we've been using the new *Junior English for China* for two years but many teachers still don't know how to teach them. Compared to the old textbooks, the new ones have got more variety of activities. They are very difficult to teach. We find there isn't enough time to go through everything that is designed to fit in one lesson. So we want to learn how to teach them, how to use the new textbooks. We also want to learn how to use it with the Students' Workbook (Appendix II).

As it happened, a large percentage of the workshop time was devoted to

understanding the textbooks, how to teach them, how to do revision and how to prepare for examinations. This is good news for the communicative approach as the new textbooks are far more communicative than any books used at secondary schools in the past. All four skills of communication are incorporated in learning activities. The accompanying *Teachers' Books* set out extremely detailed, and quite communicative, step-by-step lesson plans for teachers to follow.

The problem lies in treating the texts as an end in itself rather than the means of learning to communicate in English. The tradition dictates that textual knowledge and meaning are fixed and rote memorisation of texts is encouraged. Again, this text-centredness is in part both created and justified by the uniformity of the curriculum and standardised external examinations, and by a lack of teaching and learning resources in general. The Qinghai teachers also seemed to regard learning to use the new textbooks and adopting new teaching methods as the same thing. At the post-workshop interview, when asked if they are ready to use, and train others to use, the communicative approach, teachers responded affirmatively: "Yes, it is easy if you follow the step-by step lesson plans in the *Teachers' Book*".

The old textbooks to be phased out by 1999 were designed to be taught and tested in the grammar-translation method. With the traditional method still needed, at least until 1999 in the senior school because of examinations, as the main stream of all approaches, the survival of the communicative approach ironically depends on classroom teachers strictly adhering to the lesson plans devised in the *Teachers' Books* accompanying the new textbooks as they are implemented to each year group. Indeed, teachers are advised to do so (Liu *et al.* 1993:1-15). In an acquisition poor environment such as in Qinghai, this may prove to be an effective bridging step for teachers to eventually adopt the communicative approach.

The need to focus on texts ultimately compromises the communicative approach as it has to accommodate a top-down and uniform curriculum and to be evaluated by

external examinations. In Qinghai, this compromise is likely to be more pronounced with regional disparities and 44 ethnic minority groups living in a vast and remote area.

(3) Ethnic minority students

According to Qinghai teachers at the workshops, the distance between the schooling experience of the ethnic minority students in Qinghai and what is prescribed in the national curriculum is vast. Despite government efforts in improving the standard of education for minority peoples in China, they remain severely disadvantaged (Postiglione, 1992). Qinghai Province has six minority autonomous states and seven autonomous counties. However, of the nineteen teachers who participated in the training, only two were of minority backgrounds although most teach minority students. As the workshops mainly focused on preparing for exams and using the communicative approach to teach the new textbooks, English language education for ethnic minority students was not discussed in depth during the training, which was a sad neglect (ADB:1995c).

Of the communicative approach, teachers of minority students said that they wouldn't be able to use it as "the quality of our students are too poor". During casual conversations and lunch time chat, teachers talked about a very high rate of truancy at their schools, about "students coming to school for a sleep as they are drunk and tired". Students were described as "lazy" and "no motivation to learn English". These minority students were also having problems with Chinese as a second language. Teachers agreed that cultural traditions are different and the "students' parents don't care as most of them are illiterate in any language." Some ethnic minority groups don't have the same concept of schooling as the majority Han Chinese.

The Qinghai teachers were impressed with demonstration lessons taught by EMS teachers using the five-step method promoted in the new textbooks. When

asked whether they would be able to do the same at home in Qinghai, teachers from urban key schools were positive in their answers. However, teachers from rural and herding counties responded that "the demonstration was very good, but it's irrelevant to us as we have different students. We have very poor quality students".

One has the feeling that as the curriculum is so far removed from the reality of the average minority students in this remote and poverty-stricken area that maybe it is "irrelevant" as the teachers put it. Obviously, bilingual education is one area that needs to be addressed urgently. For the communicative approach, maybe it should first be adopted in teaching Chinese as a second language to these students and then ease on to teaching / learning English as a third language.

(4) Teachers' low status:

When the Qinghai teachers were talking about their "lazy" students and responded negatively to new ideas such as the communicative approach, doubts were expressed among some trainers and project administrators in Beijing over Qinghai teachers' ability to train others when they go back as they appeared "lazy" and "passive" during the training. They appeared lacking in initiative and their trial teaching was a failure. Why did they lack initiative? The most obvious reason seems to be teachers' low professional status.

Low professional status leads to a lack of professional commitment and a lack at accountability. Secondary school teachers are generally treated as tools or "technicians" (Paine, 1992) to pass on knowledge to students, knowledge that has been defined by higher authorities. Teachers, except perhaps a few in the priority key schools in metropolitan areas, are not involved in the curriculum development process. They are not given the rights or authority to determine and evaluate curriculum content, assessment methods or teaching methods. There is no sense of ownership of the curriculum, nor responsibility for effectively implementing it.

Everything, including very detailed lesson plans, has been prescribed and fixed for them from the top. Teachers are only told to teach this or that, this way or that way. Their work is evaluated according how many of their students can pass external examinations. In short, teachers are conditioned, if not forced, to be passive and reactive rather than proactive.

Teachers low professional status is also reflected in their low socio-economic status. Many teachers are leaving the professional to earn more money working for industries (Paine, 1991; 1992; Ross, 1991; Henze:1992). This situation is exacerbated by delayed salaries and arbitrary monetary punishment by local education bureaus. In Qinghai, English teachers are leaving for the more developed eastern provinces. In 1994, about 10% of teachers left teaching or Qinghai (ADB:1995c).

For the training program under discussion, teachers (except one from a key school in Xining) came to Beijing without knowing what they came for. Many thought they were just going to another meeting. They were rather startled to learn at the opening ceremony, from the principal of the host school, that they were to do a three-week training course and that they were to be trainers of other teachers for the second level training. Teachers complained that they had not been told of the aims and objectives of the training before they came as they explained that they "would have been better prepared".

Nevertheless, the Qinghai teachers were very impressed by the trainers', especially the EMS teachers', commitment to work (See Appendices), and by their "thorough and detailed understanding of the syllabus and the textbooks". Many were determined to do the same when they went back home.

Teachers' lack of authority over their work and their lack of professional status and commitment determine that they do not have intrinsic motivation and initiative to promote new approaches in learning and teaching, especially when they find it

difficult with various other constraints as well. If the traditional grammar-translation method is what they are used to, they are not likely to take the trouble and try a learner-centred interactive approach that needs persistence, as well as new outlook and skills, to implement.

For the communicative approach , the sad irony remains that teachers treat their students the way they are treated: in a traditional top-down authoritarian fashion.

(5) Teachers' distrust of educational administrators and cadres

Qinghai teachers expressed a profound distrust of educational administrators and cadres in Qinghai. They complained that "Qinghai has rarely organised any teacher training". When asked about a report that Qinghai had been granted a loan from the World Bank for further teacher training, one teacher from a key school dismissed this by saying that

> the local governments in the counties will always find ways too spend the money elsewhere. Even if they have the loan, they won't necessarily use it to set up a training centre or fund any in-service training programs. They won't necessarily spend the money on educational facilities (Appendix II).

In some counties, educational bureaus kept teachers' bonuses because their students did not do well enough to go to university. They did not send the *Teachers' Book* and *Students' Workbooks* and the accompanying tapes to schools as they should. As a result, "we've been using the new books for two years but the students have never listened to the tapes. So it is still reading after the teacher and the students don't have the opportunity to hear standard spoken English." (Appendix II). As the books are free, the reason for not getting them "maybe because the State Education Commission didn't know how many students there are in Qinghai. They didn't send enough". When told that listening skill may be included in the 1999 entrance examination, teachers said they would "talk with the school when we go back and apply to buy a tape-recorder and get the tapes".

During casual conversations, a few teachers from rural and herding areas laughed off the idea of the follow-up county-based training, which was to be the second level training of the ADB project. They said it was not going to happen as the cadres at local education bureaus "don't care about training teachers". When told that money had been allocated for the training and they themselves have to be trainers, teachers assured me that the education bureaus will use the money elsewhere.

This distrust of local cadres in charge of education was somewhat confirmed during the training. The teachers were not briefed before they came to the workshops in Beijing. For the Qinghai seminar before the workshops, despite the fact that project organisers from the ADB, from Beijing and the Australian team-leader paid a special visit to Qinghai to arrange it a week in advance, only three people participated in the English seminar (another three came but had to work as interpreters at seminars for other curriculum areas such as mathematics and science). At least twenty people had been planned for and expected to attend each seminar. The reason for the poor turn-up was because the teachers and teacher educators were not informed of the seminar. The three participants said they were told "to come and meet some people from Beijing and some foreigners". They did not really plan for a seminar. Some consultants from Beijing commented that administrators in remote areas such as Qinghai "don't like the trouble of having visitors even when everything was paid by the ADB". Others talked about "insulation and laziness" of Qinghai cadres. There was a suspicion, however, that maybe, these cadres also resent, or even distrust, central control though they themselves are the products and machinations of it.

Quite ironically in this context, the communicative approach is in danger of being seen and resented by classroom teachers as another thing or command from the top. While it is possible to force teachers to teach for examinations, the nature of the communicative approach demands constant negotiations and interactions among all involved in its implementation. The top-down structure of education and teachers'

distrust of those in charge hamper the effort of adopting a more communicative approach in the classroom.

(6) Teachers' low proficiency in English

Lack of qualified teachers is one of the most serious problems facing education reform in China (Henze, 1992). Of the 19 teachers at the workshops, only six were four-year trained. The majority of the participants could not effectively communicate in English. This low proficiency in the target language as the biggest obstruction on the part of the teacher in adopting the communicative approach in teaching. Teachers themselves agree (Appendices). One teacher commented "if you can't use the language you can't make the best use of the textbooks". The detailed lesson plans devised in the *Teachers' Book* accompanying the new textbooks aim to help teachers. But they are in English, and it takes a very conscientious teacher to work through the plans with the eclectic approach. Many teachers don't use them or can't use them because of various constraints as discussed in this essay.

Therefore, teachers' English language ability needs to be addressed urgently through inservice training. The communicative approach can then be used in the teaching / learning process during the language training. As teachers themselves are given the opportunity to learn English through interactive use, they are likely to adopt the same approach in their own teaching. This might prove to be more effective than explicit methodology training.

(7) Physical constraints

Lack of government funding for primary and secondary schools in China, especially for the majority non-key schools in rural areas, are well documented (Pepper, 1991; Ross, 1991; Hooper, 1991). Ross (1991:67) reported that reform and "invigorated teaching and leadership in predominantly urban centre of excellence are accompanied by persistent shortfalls in educational provision in less-developed rural areas where ninety percent of secondary schools fail to meet national standards for such basic

facilities as chairs, desks, and safe drinking water." Most schools in rural/herding areas in Qinghai belong to those ninety percent.

Teachers at the training talked about having no electricity, no tape-recorders, no tapes and sometimes no books. Teaching resources and support materials are rare, which is common in rural and minority areas in China. Classes are big with "over 60 students". These physical constraints contribute to the acquisition poor environment and make learner-centred interactive activities such as role-plays, group work and the use of games and so on difficult to manage, if not impossible.

(8) The location of in-service training programs

Although the Qinghai teachers clearly enjoyed visiting Beijing, many insisted it would have been more effective and relevant to the Qinghai context had the training been held in Qinghai. Alternatively, all trainers should have visited Qinghai, especially some regional schools in the province.

Moreover, Qinghai has two tertiary level teacher training institutions (the QNU and the QIE) in Xining and quite a few specialised secondary teachers' colleges. These institutions are responsible for teacher education in Qinghai. However, they were not involved in the ADB training project though representatives (cadres as team leaders) from the Qinghai and Xining Education Commissions were at the training with the teachers. From conversations with them and with some teachers, one has the feeling that the Qinghai administration might have been more active and shown more responsibility in decision making had they been in charge of the training. In Beijing, they were mere visitors accompanying the teachers. The overall feeling was secondary school teachers were taken out of their home context. Maybe there was a bit of resentment of being told what to do not only by the top but also by outsiders. This subtle resentment was translated into "passivity and laziness" as seen by some trainers and administrators in Beijing.

While this is speculation based on this trainer's observation and perception, the reality of vast regional and cultural disparities demands training teachers in their own context in order to be relevant and useful to them. The teacher is the beginning and end of the training process and "educational change depends on what teachers do and think" (Fullan, 1991:117). The Qinghai teacher trainers in Xining would be conducting the second level training. Although they do not have a first hand knowledge of the Beijing workshops on which the second level training was to be based, they would most likely have a more regional focus in their approach, which is good as it would be closer to the classroom reality in Qinghai.

3.3 Conclusion of discussion

The study identified the pressure of external examinations and the demands of a uniform curriculum as the biggest challenges facing teachers in adopting the communicative approach at secondary schools in Qinghai. The top-down curriculum model contradicts the principles of the communicative approach and leaves the needs of ethnic minority students unaddressed in the education process.

The study also found that teachers' low status, especially their low professional status, and their distrust of educational administrators and cadres inhibit them from actively embracing new ideas and change and effectively implementing them in their classrooms. In this context, the communicative approach is in danger of being seen, and resisted, as just another idea from the top.

Secondary school teachers' low status in Qinghai partly leads to teachers' low proficiency in English. This handicaps their ability to communicate in English in the classroom. The study found that this problem is compounded by physical constraints brought by lack of government funding. The study also discussed the location of the training workshop and its relevance to the context of secondary education in Qinghai.

All factors in the findings are interrelated and together they constitute formidable challenges faced by Qinghai teachers in adopting the communicative approach in their classrooms.

4 Recommendations

In light of the discussions of research findings, a number of recommendations can be made for future training programs for secondary school English teachers working in rural and minority areas in China.

This study proposes that training programs will be more effective and relevant to the classroom reality and the needs of trainees when

a. adequate project lead time are allowed for systematic needs analysis, local area familiarisation and briefing of all trainers concerning the context of training and of the participants. (If possible, all trainers should visit some local schools and recognise the constraints faced by teachers before training in order for the program to be practical and relevant to the trainees).

b. sufficient lead time are also allowed for close collaboration of all trainers in program design in order for the training to be systematic and consistent.

c. trainees are well briefed and consulted as to the aims, objectives, the actual style and content and the expected outcomes of the training program. (Adequate preparation on the part of the trainees helps ensure their active participation in the training workshops).

d. English language proficiency training are included as part of the training program as the effective use of the communicative approach can be jeopardised by the lack of English on the part of the class teacher.

e. teachers educators in the local province and language co-ordinators and officers from the local education commission(s) and bureaus are involved in the training program so as to help them organise and carry out further training of other teachers.

f. more emphases are placed on the specific needs in ethnic minority education, particularly, the challenges faced by teachers and students in the context of cultural and linguistic differences and the importance of acknowledging and

understanding the differences.

Obviously, this set of recommendations have their limitations as they are only resulted from the analysis of, and specific to, the one training program under discussion. Thus they are only of reference value. For effective application, they need to be modified according to the needs and specific situations of future training programs.

5. Limitations and Conclusion of Study

This is a very small study mainly based on perceptions of some Qinghai teachers and some trainers and observations of a training workshop. It has many limitations as the focus group was small and the subjectivity of the researcher and the respondents have to be taken into account. Also, as this research mainly examines the difficulties and challenges faced by Qinghai teachers, the results may sound more negative than they should be. Furthermore, many more issues, particularly ethnic minority education and bilingual education, need to be examined in more depth in order to fully appreciate the context into which the communicative approach is introduced. Savignon (!991:265) points out that "central to communicative language teaching is the understanding of language learning as both an educational and a political issue". It is obviously more so for Qinghai Province with its 44 ethnic peoples.

Nevertheless, within its limitations, the study provides a snapshot of English language education in Qinghai Province with particular regard to the possible use of the communicative approach. The difficulties and challenges identified and the recommendations should be of some reference value for future teacher training programs in China. As education in China is going through reform which is favourable to the communicative approach, this study may also stimulate more discussion on ELT in rural and minority areas in China.

The difficulties and challenges as identified in this study are interrelated and together they form a formidable reality facing teachers as they are encouraged to adopt the communicative approach in teaching English. In Qinghai, ultimately, the communicative approach has to negotiate its survival in the dilemma between coping with authoritarian central control and addressing the needs and expectations of students from vastly different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Because of regional disparities and the special case of Qinghai with 44 different ethnic groups, the future for the communicative approach does not look as bright as in eastern metropolitan areas. However, for the development of communicative ability, research findings support "the *integration* of form-focused exercises with meaning-focused experience" (Savignon, 1991:269; McKay, 1994b). For the communicative approach, a strong version (totally focused on meaningful communication) and a weak one (integration of grammatical rules with communication) may be defined for classroom application (McKay, 1994b). In light of the educational context in Qinghai, the weaker version may be more suitable. Obviously, more in-depth studies on the Qinghai situation are needed in order to determine exactly what such a model should entail to suit the needs of students in Qinghai.

The good news for a more communicative approach is that education in China , including foreign language education, is currently under reform and some of the constraints discussed are being addressed. Indeed, this was exactly what the ADB training project was set out to do.

Moreover, despite various constraints and difficulties discussed, the response to the workshop itself remained largely positive. The training assured teachers of the importance of using a more communicative approach in the teaching and learning of English. The study can be concluded then, on a very positive note, with one Qinghai

teacher's comments at the post-workshop interview on adopting a more communicative approach in her classroom:

> I'll try it. I wanted to be more communicative in the classroom but didn't dare for fear of disadvantaging my students in the exams. But now I think I'll try it when I go back. It'll be a good thing in a long run. Their ability to use English will show at university, if not at secondary school. They'll have the advantage of being able to use English then (Appendix II).

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7. Appendices

Appendix I: Interview Questions:

1. Before the workshops:

A. Questions for co-trainers(2) from Beijing Normal University:

1. Why are the Qinghai middle school teachers chosen to be trained in Beijing?
2. What is the government's purpose in training these teachers?
3. What teaching methods / approaches are commonly practised in middle schools in China?
4. What approach(es) do you perceive to be the most useful and appropriate for these teachers? Why?
5. What do you think are the tenets of a communicative methodology?
Would a communicative methodology be appropriate? Why or why not?
6. What would you expect to see as the desirable outcome of this training programme?

B. Questions for the Qinghai middle school teachers (3):

1. How long have you been teaching English? What grades do you teach? What is the average class size?
2. What are students' attitudes towards learning English?
3. What do you see as the most important goal in teaching English at secondary schools in Qinghai?
What do you hope your students will achieve in learning English?
4. Do you and your students have any contact with native English speakers?
5. What percentage of time do you use for the following activities?
-- group work
-- role play
-- written grammar work
-- translation
-- listening to tapes
-- speaking English
-- using only the textbook
-- lecturing
-- ?
--
6. Are you familiar with the term "the communicative approach"? What do you think it means?
7. What would you expect to gain from (or contribute to) this training programme?

2. After the workshops:

A. Questions to the co-trainers:

1. What do you think were the strength and weaknesses of the workshops?
2. Should we have included (or excluded) anything else?
3. Which methods do you think the teachers will apply easily? Which ones might prove to be a challenge? Why?
4. What would your recommendations be (regarding teaching methodology and approaches) for the further training of middle school English teachers in remote areas?
5. Is there anything else that you'd like to say about the workshops and the whole training programme?

B. Questions for the Qinghai teachers:

1. Which ideas and activities from the workshops will you use in your own teaching? Why?
2. Which ideas and activities are not possible to use? Why?
3. What things at schools in Qinghai will have to change before you could use these ideas and methods?
4. What do you think of the way the workshops were conducted? Please number the following activities according to their usefulness to your teaching (i.e. No.1 is the most useful, No. 10 will be the least useful):

( ) lectures
( ) group work
( ) practical activities
( ) lesson demonstrations
( )
( )
5. How do you think that your teaching may be affected as a result of these workshops?
6. Would you like to make any suggestions for future training programmes?

Appendix II: Interview transcripts

1. Pre-training interviews

With a trainer:

N.B.: Answers to Questions 1 and 2 are not on the tape. The following answers to these two questions are from the notes I took from various sources.

1. Why are the Qinghai middle school teachers chosen to be trained in Beijing?
-- remote and minority area; poverty; lagging behind in the curricula and teaching methodology reform;

2. What is the purpose of training these teachers?
-- familiarise them with the reform agenda and process; introduce modern teaching approaches; expose them to more progressive / modern and better equipped schools in China; exchange ideas about teacher training in remote areas

***** An interview with one of the co-trainers Mr. X, Head of English, Beijing Normal University - Experimental Middle School(EMS)**

Researcher: What teaching methods are commonly used in secondary schools in China?

X: It is difficult to pinpoint a fixed method. There are a lot of differences in different regions in China. At our school(EMS), for example, we basically adopt a communicative approach in the Junior School. Listening and Speaking skills first and Reading and Writing follow. We use a lot of activities such as dialogues and role-play to get students express themselves in English, especially now with the new textbooks. So it is basically a communicative approach.

However, in the Senior School, we are relatively more traditional. Of course we have listening and speaking activities, but the textbooks are still the old ones and they are restricting. Another reason is the National Entrance Examination. Ultimately, our aim is to achieve good results in the exams. At the moment, the exams only focus on written English. At our school, we do have listening and speaking lessons every week, as well as reading lessons, but we mainly concentrate on more traditional lecturing and paraphrasing sentence structures. The approach is fairly old-fashioned with emphasis on grammar explanation, reading the texts, targeting difficult structures and so on. But there have been changes in recent years, for instance, we have started discussing social backgrounds of texts, doing dialogues, making suggestions as to what happens in a story, retelling and reciting texts etc. These activities contain some communicative elements but there are much less of them compared with what we do in the Junior School. Because we have to prepare for the exams, we are more traditional.

Researcher: Teachers do have the pressure of responsibility to prepare students to pass exams.

X: Yes, exactly. In Senior Three, especially during the last semester, everything is about coaching the students for exams. We do a lot of sample exam papers, getting the students ready. Usually at Senior Three, there is no teaching method. What teaching method? We have to concentrate on doing sample test papers and vocabulary building through reading comprehension exercises. Nobody worries about teaching methods any more. The thing is students do learn a lot of English this way, as they have to go through a lot of reading comprehension exercises. Other test items such as cloze tests and multiple choice are helpful, too. However, the purpose and emphasis of these activities are to coach students for exams instead of training them to use English as a language to communicate.

Researcher: What about Junior Three?

X: It is similar to that in the Senior School. The second semester in Junior Three is also basically spent coaching students to pass exams for senior high.

Teacher 1: (A teacher from Qinghai who spent a year in the US; she and her friend **Teacher 2** have been listening to Xu and now joins the conversation):

Coaching for exams is very common in Qinghai. The junior schools are making efforts to adopt a more communicative teaching method but we still have a long way to go. In many districts in Qinghai, the quality of teachers and that of their students are very limited. Many teachers are locally trained with only two-year diplomas. They understand in their mind what you are saying about a communicative approach, but they can't apply it because they can't speak English. Therefore, they are not able to produce high quality students. The Key Schools are better. Senior School education is completely and totally about coaching students to pass exams. Education for quality students is out of the question. In order to produce good results in the National Entrance Examinations at the end of the three years, some teachers start training from Senior One. They coach the students to deal with the exam items one by one, the vocabulary one by one, the grammatical structures one by one. There is no teaching methodology. It is worse in ordinary schools. The Key Schools are a bit better, with Senior One and Two doing a bit of listening, speaking and role-playing activities. In the vast majority of cases in Qinghai, education means coaching students for exams. Occasionally you hear people talk about education for quality (of citizens?), but it is just lip-service. In the end, there is the National Entrance Examination to take.

Researcher: It's just like "the educational framework" we discussed this morning. The structure is top down. The choice of teaching methods is severely restricted by assessment methods.

X & Teacher 1: Yes.

Teacher 1: In Qinghai, however, the more serious restriction is the lack of English on behalf of some of the teachers. They need to improve their English. They can't use the language, and they can't make the best use of the textbooks.

Researcher: Of this training program, do you think the teachers have come to learn about language teaching methods or to improve their English?

Teacher 1: We are all interested, and hoping, to have more opportunities to meet and talk with the EMS English teachers, to learn details about how they do revision work, how they deal with new vocabulary and how they actually teach the texts.

Researcher: How they teach the textbooks?

Teacher 1: Yes, that's right. We only have 21 days. It is difficult to improve our English within such a short time. The teachers who came to this training are all key teachers, better qualified than average. The problem is we don't have the environment to use our English, so in a lot of cases, it's like we are going down hill all the time.

X: This is a very common problem. We as teachers have to keep learning all the time. At high school, what we teach is not really advanced English, not very demanding, and we don't have many opportunities to study and work in an English speaking country. Moreover, we are always busy planning lessons, marking students' workbooks and we don't have much time to improve our English. Therefore, the quality of teachers is a very serious problem.

Teacher 1: The government should spend some money on teacher in-service training in their areas of expertise. Teaching would be more rewarding for us if we could improve our English. I think teachers would be more interested in their work, too. Otherwise, it is like working just for a meal-ticket, tedious. That's why ambitious people usually leave the teaching profession. They don't see any future staying at schools.

X: There should be more teacher training, especially in the remote and minority areas.

Researcher: Last week in Qinghai, I heard from an official from the Qinghai Basic Education Commission that China has just been granted a 8 million(Yuan) loan from the World Bank to fund teacher training programs in eight disadvantaged provinces and counties. Qinghai is one of them.

Teacher 1: Qinghai has rarely organised any teacher training workshops. The local governments in the districts will always find ways to spend the money elsewhere. Even if they have the loan, they won't necessarily use it to set up a training centre or fund any in-service training program. They won't necessarily spend the money on educational facilities.

Researcher: We heard at the Qinghai seminar last week about how the Qinghai Education Commission didn't usually have the money to send language coordinators to national conferences and seminars.

Teacher 1: Every year we receive invitations to attend national conferences and seminars on foreign language teaching, we just don't have the money to go.

Researcher: I've heard that Tibet is the only other region that doesn't attend these meetings.

*** The interview was interrupted and terminated here, much to my regret.

Pre-training:

Interview with three Qinghai teachers from rural areas

*** **NB.:** The interview was conducted three days into the training workshops.

Teacher 3: senior English teacher for 7 years;
Teacher 4: junior English teacher for 4 years;
Teacher 5: junior English teacher for 6 years.

Researcher: What would you expect to gain from this training program?

Teacher 3. We hope to learn some modern teaching methods. In Qinghai, we've been using the new Junior English textbooks for two years but many teachers still don't know how to teach them. Compared to the old textbooks, the new ones have got more varieties of activities in them. They are very difficult to teach. We find there is not enough time to go through everything that is designed to fit in one lesson. So we want to learn how to teach them, how to use the new textbooks. We also want to know how to use the Student Book and the Workbook together.

Teacher 4: I'd like to learn more English, to learn some theory about language teaching, to observe how the Beijing Experimental Middle School teachers apply the theories into practice and to see how the EMS teachers plan their lessons. The old textbooks and the old approaches were all about students reading after the teacher, learning everything by heart, reciting and so on. But now we are expected to be more flexible and to have more student activities.

Teacher 3. It is very difficult to have activities with big classes. We have very big classes in Qinghai. Teachers need to be very experienced.

Researcher: There might be ways to divide big classes into small groups, with a good student as team leader in each.

Teacher 5: It is very difficult for the students to move around. We use long benches in the classrooms and they are nailed to the floor. It is very difficult to divide a big class into small groups.

Teacher 3: It's like our school. We are in the countryside and the school is very poorly equipped. We've been using the new Junior English textbooks for two years and the students have never listened to the accompanying tapes.

Researcher: How come?

Teacher 3: We don't have a tape-recorder. Actually we don't have the tapes either. So it is still reading after the teacher and the students don't have the opportunity to hear standard spoken English.

Teacher 4. we don't have tapes, either. And we don't have any Teacher's Book.

Researcher: The schools didn't buy them?

Teacher 4. I don't know. Oh, they are all supposed to be free. They just didn't arrive.

Teacher 3: The State Education Commission didn't know how many students there were in Qinghai. They probably didn't send us enough copies. Our Junior Two students don't have the Workbooks. If teachers want to use them, we have to photocopy for all students. It's just too much work. Besides, very often there is no electricity and most schools don't have a photocopier anyway.

Teacher 4: At the beginning of the semester, I spent over a week travelling around looking for the Students' Workbooks and the Teacher's Book. I went to Huangzhong County, and then I went to Pingyuan County. I didn't get any.

Teacher 5: It's terrible. I would really like to see how others teach big classes. My classes are just too big. The EMS here doesn't seem to have big classes. They only have about 40 students in each class. I have over 60 in each of my classes. The only way I am able to do small group work was outside class. Sometimes I get good students to pair off with poor students after school so they can do their homework together. The better students usually tutor the poor ones. I check their work the next morning.

Researcher: That's an excellent idea. Of the methods we discussed in the last couple of days, which ones do you usually use?

Teacher 5: The grammar-translation method. We have to teach for exams. It doesn't matter how good your listening and speaking skills are, it is no good if you can't pass the exams.

Researcher: Listening skill is to be introduced to the exams in 1999 I've heard?

Teacher 5: Yes, well, if there's going to be listening in the tests, we'll just have to talk with the school when we go back. We'll apply to buy a tape-recorder and get the tapes. We can't do anything with the electricity. Things are very difficult in the countryside.

Teacher 4: I think the "silent way" is a good way to introduce vocabulary. I use it sometimes.

Researcher: That's good. Are there discussions among the students? Do you do small group work?

Teacher 4. Yes. For example, before introducing a new text, I usually write a few questions about the text on the blackboard. Students go through the questions, discuss them and exchange their answers. Then we open the textbook and go over the text

together. Because there are questions, students would naturally look for answers in the text. I also encourage students to find answers and punish those who can't or won't by making them sing a song in front of the class or copy out a lot of vocabulary.

Researcher: What other activities do you do in class?

Teacher 4: My students do some writing everyday, like keeping a diary. Something simple, two or three sentences would be OK.

Researcher: It's a good habit.

Teacher 4: At the end of each unit, I also get students to categorise the vocabulary we learned in the unit. It is easier for them to remember by putting the words into different groups.

Teacher 3: Our problem in the Qinghai countryside is that we are too poor, and the schools lack facilities. Which schools did you visit when you were there last week?

Researcher: Only two schools: Huangyuan Number One Middle School at the Huangyuan county seat and Hutai Middle School in Xining city.

All three teachers: Both are Key Schools. They are among the best. These schools are well equipped and the quality of the students are very high. They are different from us.

Researcher: Is there anything else you'd like to say about teaching English in Qinghai and the training program?

Teacher 5: I just wonder how they teach that new textbooks. With all the details, I just find there is no time to go through them all.

Teacher 4: The other thing is English is a foreign language. I mean we very seldom have the opportunity to use English, only in class.

Researcher: In class, we try to create an English speaking environment for our students. How many lessons do you have each week?

Teacher 4: I have three junior classes. Four 45-minute lessons for each class. That's 12. Plus tutoring, altogether about 17 to 18 lessons a week.

Researcher: Do you live at school or at home?

Teacher 4: We all live at school. We have to mark students' homework everyday.

Researcher: What kind of homework do they do, since they don't have the official Workbook?

Teacher 5: We concentrate on grammar exercises. It is a very practical approach. If students don't pass exams, we teachers get fined and demoted. We don't get paid much, so we don't want to be fined. If your students' exam results are really poor, your name will be mentioned at teachers' meetings and you'll be branded as the poor teacher. It's very embarrassing.

Teacher 4: So passing exams is the sole purpose. Exams are seen not only as assessing the students, but also as assessing the ability of the teachers. It is the measure for a good teacher. So our slogan is to concentrate on the exams.

Researcher: So we are educating people to pass exams.

Teacher 5: Yes, you are only a good teacher if your students do well in their exams.

Teacher 4: We are entitled to an allowance up to 20% of our salaries, But last year, our whole county didn't do well in the exams, so the County Education Bureau kept all our allowances.

Teacher 5: For the Entrance Exams to get into senior school, you get a bonus in direct proportion with the number of your students who pass. However, you get a fine if none of your students does.

Researcher: That's terrible. ... Thank you very much for your time.

Post training interviews

With the trainer X:

Researcher: What do you think were the strength and weaknesses of the workshops?

X: The workshop was generally good. It was quite comprehensive as far as the issues covered concerned. First, we suggested ways of teaching the new Junior textbooks. Being teachers of English, we need to change our whole outlook and approach to teaching. The new Junior textbooks demand new approaches. So we aimed at changing and updating teachers' ideas and outlooks about language teaching. Secondly, we introduced new teaching methods. Thirdly, we discussed how to be consistent with new circumstances, new textbooks and new approaches and still preparing for the Entrance Exams in the current educational climate.

All the trainers were well prepared. The response from the Qinghai teachers indicates that the training is of great help to them. The First Level training is a success.

There are quite a few weaknesses. First, the Qinghai teachers were not well prepared for the workshops. Some teachers did not know what they were coming to Beijing for. They were not clear as to the aims and objectives of the whole First Level training program. They did not know that they were to be the trainers for the Second Level training back home in Qinghai. So it was a bit hectic when they arrived.

Secondly, the context of educational reform in our country dictates that we are in a transition period with English language education. This is a time of change: change from traditional teaching philosophy and outlooks to modern teaching approaches and methodologies. As such, the EMS teacher trainers themselves have not taught the new Senior English textbooks - they are to be implemented nationwide for Senior One next year. So for this training, we used the old existing Senior textbooks. We aimed to introduce new methods and to prepare the teachers to teach the new books in 1996 but we demonstrated with traditional materials. We are in a transition period.

Researcher: The new Senior English for China is to be implemented in September next year?

X: Yes. Start from Senior One next September, and then to Senior Two and Three year by year. The new Senior books are in the same vein as the new Junior books which have been in use for three years now. So the Senior One students next year will be the first group that have only used the new books since the beginning of their English course. By 1999, the whole senior school will be using the new textbooks. And for the National Entrance Exam in 1999, listening skill will be included. I think by then the reform will be more complete. But right now we are in a transition period, so it is a combination of old and new and every thing. Therefore, looking back on the training program, it is a weakness that we did our workshops using the old textbooks.

However, this weakness was in part compensated by the local consultant Liu Daoyi. Most of her talk was on the new senior textbooks and how teachers should use them. Also, all the trainers did well in analysing the new Junior books -- the more communicative approach advocated in the books and so on. I think this will be helpful for the Qinghai teachers to use the new Senior books next year.

Another weakness is in the style of the training program itself. This time we still mainly used lecturing. Only the foreign consultant used seminar and discussions among the students.

Researcher: I didn't do enough activities either. Time was short. I think it takes time to train and foster a more communicative class atmosphere.

X: I agree. From the Qinghai teacher's point of view, they don't feel comfortable with discussions among themselves. They all hope to listen to the trainers. They've come to learn, so they expect us to feed them knowledge.

So on the whole I feel that we lectured too much. There weren't enough activities for the trainees themselves to really internalise the aims of the program and the teaching methods we are trying to introduce. These activities are lacking. Of course we have time restrictions. You probably need more time with activities.

Researcher: It takes a lot patience to train people to new things, too.

X: Yes. I feel the Qinghai teachers were uncomfortable with the new approaches. They themselves sort of had this psychological barrier. They didn't know each other that well and were sort of embarrassed to open up in class.

Anyway, I feel that, in future training, there should be more class activities among the trainees, not just lecturing by the trainers. With more activities, the trainees would be able to put the theories into practice and they would better understand what they learn in the lectures. For the Qinghai teachers who will be trainers for the second and third level training back home, it would certainly have been more helpful.
Another shortcoming with the workshops is that there were too few high quality demonstration lessons.

Researcher: Demonstration lessons with students?

X: Yes, with the students. There weren't enough. for Junior English, we brought back two junior classes. It is just difficult to bring back all the students from their holidays. We had two sessions but weren't able to video-tape them (for the Qinghai teachers to take back) though we had planned to. For the senior demonstration lessons, we only played two taped lessons. They were good, but there should have been more.

Researcher: In remote areas in Qinghai, they don't have the facilities to use videos, do they?

X: I see equipment as only relative. The more crucial part lies in the ability of the teachers to motivate students and help develop their potential. This ability is extremely important. Take schools in Beijing for example, they are much better equipped and have a better environment. But still the reality is not every teacher can enthuse his or her students, motivate them to do activities in class or give them enough opportunities to practice. Here, the problem is, I think, with the teacher.

Researcher: Teaching approaches of the teacher?

X: Yes, teaching approaches, and teaching beliefs or philosophy of the teacher, what you believe language teaching should be. That is the question. If this is not sorted out, it doesn't matter how well equipped the school is, you still can't have a good lesson.

Of course, the conditions in Qinghai schools are terrible and can't be compared with those in Beijing, but I think if the teachers could foster correct teaching beliefs, provided they are qualified academically, they would work out ways according to their conditions to motivate students, to enthuse them and help develop their potential.

We in Beijing can only demonstrate what we do, and now looking back I think we didn't do enough. From the view point of the Qinghai teachers - I chatted with some of them, they hoped to observe more demonstration lessons taught by EMS teachers.

Researcher: Yes, the responses to the evaluation questionnaire showed this, too.

X: Yes, there should have been more demonstrations, followed by more discussions on how the class activities were organised, how the lesson was planned, why the students were so active and enthusiastic and so on. Demonstration, and then detailed analysis of the demonstration. Analysis of the teacher's approaches, style and strategies and so on. We didn't do enough in this respect. The training would have been more effective with more of this. Of course it was during the holidays and we couldn't get the students to come back to school. Also, time was limited and we were not well prepared in this regard. Still another difficulty was we were not provided the video camera to tape the lessons as planned.
Going back to changing teachers' beliefs in teaching(or their ideas about what teaching is or should be), teachers' standard in their area of expertise should be raised. Teachers should not just have practical experience, but also should have some training in teaching theories, for example, linguistics, educational psychology, socio-linguistics and related areas. These theories, if introduced to teachers with practice, will be very helpful in changing their philosophy in teaching.

Researcher: It takes a long time to learn the theories.

X: Oh I don't mean lecturing them on pure theories. That wouldn't be necessary. It would be difficult for them to take, too. I mean ideas, guidelines or even thoughts about language teaching born out of our teaching experiences. If we could tell them these, it would be sort of like theory consciousness-raising. In this training, we touched a bit of this area, but not nearly enough. We should do more next time.

Still another weakness of the program is with the preparation. We EMS trainers were not familiar with the Qinghai condition. We didn't know the specific difficulties faced by the trainees.

Researcher: Some trainees pointed out in the final evaluation that the EMS trainers should have visited Qinghai schools before the training. Some suggested we should train Qinghai teachers in Qinghai next time so it wouldn't be out of context.

X: They are right. Because we didn't know the actual situations in Qinghai schools, we planned according to what we imagined what it would be like in remote areas. We gradually got more information during the training chatting with a few of the Qinghai teachers. However, as the whole program and workshop materials had already been set, it was difficult to have major alterations.

This is the first time we've had a training program on this scale, we have learned a lot from the Qinghai teachers. For future training, we'll be better prepared.

Researcher: Which methods do you think the teachers will apply easily? which ones might prove to be a challenge? Why?

X: We introduced many methods to them. The grammar-translation method will be the easiest for them because by that they basically don't have to speak English in class. You can teach English in Chinese with this method. It is easy for teachers and their students. Of course we can use grammar-translation method, but the problem we have in China is that we use this method too much. It is especially so in Qinghai.

The communicative approach will be difficult for them. To teach and learn a language through communication, through the practice of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, and to explain grammatical structures using a communicative method, all these will be difficult for the Qinghai teachers. Why? Because the quality of the teachers are not quite to the ideal standard.

Researcher: Do you mean their English language ability?

X: Yes, their level of English does not meet the demands of a more communicative approach. To use this method, they first of all have to improve their English, and this is not a problem that can be resolved instantaneously.

Another thing is with teachers' beliefs of teaching. Some teachers are afraid that a more communicative approach may adversely affect their students' performances in exams for it is sort of contradictory with the requirement of the current examination system. How to integrate these two aspects - achieving good test results while using modern teaching methodologies - is the question. Theoretically, there shouldn't be any conflicts. I think they can be about the same goal because if students' English language ability has improved (using a communicative approach), their test results will be good, too. However, in actual teaching at the classroom level, sometimes there are contradictions.

Researcher: It's difficult with the exams mainly on grammatical knowledge and reading and writing skills and no listening and speaking.

X: Yes, it's quite difficult to aim, on the one hand, for students to learn to communicate in English and on the other, for them to do well in grammatical exams. I must admit there are difficulties in teaching. Actually, it is extremely difficult sometimes.

Researcher: Some junior school teachers among the trainees found it difficult to speak English. The senior teachers were better.

X: Yes. With the communicative approach, teachers are mainly worried about the National Entrance Examinations. Good test results by your students are seen as proof of you as a good teacher. This has created a lot of competition among the teachers themselves. This teacher evaluation method itself is really wrong. It is not scientific. But the reality, especially in Qinghai, is that this is how teachers are assessed. Therefore, teachers' enthusiasm and creativity, their spirit of innovation are severely obstructed. This is really a difficult matter to deal with.

Researcher: With the reform in curricula, the exam system will be reformed, too, won't it?

X: Yes, it will. But the problem at the moment is the system will not change until 1999. So for the next three years it will remain the same as now. In Senior English, teachers will not spend time and efforts in listening and speaking; they will have to concentrate on reading and writing skills and on grammatical structures.

Researcher: Well, this corresponds with the grammar-translation method in teaching and learning.

X: Yes, it does. Actually, the exam contents are gradually changing, too. They are not purely grammar structures any more. For example, an item about phonetics (pronunciation) was included in the last exam, and for reading, the emphasis seemed to be on the comprehension ability of students, their understanding of the language in context. So there have been changes in reading and writing items even though there are no listening and speaking tests.

Researcher: The changes contain communicative elements?

X: Yes, leaning towards language for communication. So to adopt a more communicative approach in senior English accordingly is not completely out of the question.

Researcher: But it is a slow process.

X: A very slow process.

Researcher: How could the teachers be helped more in order to apply a more communicative approach?

X: For any language teacher training programs, there should be another task besides training people how to teach, which is to help improve teachers' language proficiency level.

Language proficiency training should be part of the project. This time, the consultants all conducted the workshops in English and the trainees have practised their listening skill. In the future, teaching method training should go hand in hand with English language proficiency training in order to achieve better results.

Also future training programs should provide reference books and relevant materials for the trainees to take home. Of course this time we gave them our lecture scripts and recommended some books. Many of the teachers asked me about reference materials that are affiliated with the English textbooks. We (EMS) bought them a set of Junior Teachers' Reference Books.

Researcher: I gave everyone a copy of the "Stick Figures for English Teaching" accompanying the new textbooks.

X: That's good. It's difficult to find any suitable reference materials for the senior school. I think the Qinghai government should spend some money on books and English teaching materials for teachers to use. Because they were only here for three weeks, it was too short a time to purchase some of the books they need.

After training interviews with two trainees:
N.B. Teachers 1 and 2 already talked with me during the pre-training interview with the EMS trainer

Teacher 1, 4-year trained and spent a year at a US school teaching Chinese on an exchange program; teaches Senior English at a key school affiliated to the Qinghai Normal University in Xining, capital of Qinghai;

Teacher 2, 3-year trained, teaches Senior English at a school in Xining

Researcher : Which ideas and activities from the workshops will you use in you own teaching? Why?

Teacher 2: Liu Daoyi(one of the local consultants) talked about how to put theory into practice. I think her workshop was very useful for us. She helped us understand the syllabuses, the guideline and principle underlining the syllabuses. She showed us clearly a path ahead as we have to start using the new senior textbook next year. She provided a short cut for us in our understanding of the syllabuses and the new textbooks. Now we know how to guide our students in their study.

Also, Liu Daoyi's vivid and lively teaching style is inspiring. I think this style is very important, especially for foreign language teachers. We need to get our students into a state of excitement, a state of liveliness, so they can acquire knowledge through an easy and happy process. This should be helpful for students' memory, too, because the situations, gestures and atmosphere in class will help them recall words they have learned.

Ms. Wang Qiang provided the theories. The theories and Liu's practical advice are very helpful in raising the quality of us teachers. The EMS teachers' workshops about how to do revision work - actually we normally do the same in Qinghai - were helpful, too. We just need to talk less in class and let students practice more.

Teacher 1: The EMS teachers shared their experiences, which are the result of many years' teaching in the secondary school environment. So what they talked about was very practical, problem-solving, how to deal with the textbooks, how to prepare for exams and so on, all their own experiences. All these are very close to our reality and thus very helpful.

Teacher 2: From the EMS teachers we realise that here they explain far less in class than we do. Because they have better quality students, the teachers talk less and the students practice more. In Qinghai, we are in a remote region and our students are of much poorer quality, so we have to explain things again and again, back and forth. We finish up explaining too much, and our students practice too little.

The most impressive thing about the EMS teachers is that they all have an extremely thorough understanding of the syllabuses and the textbooks. We in Qinghai do the same with the textbooks, but the EMS teachers know every little requirement in the syllabus about the National Exams, every little detail. That's why they can be fully prepared for the exams.

Teacher 1: Another thing is their teaching style. Their guiding principle is totally new. Of this point, because of the reality with our students, we have certain limitations. However, we can change the situation, if we teachers could adopt new methods, new guiding principles in our teaching. I don't agree with the opinion that changing is impossible because we have poor quality students. If your guiding principle is to make students more active, then you will create ways to make them active and lively, and change the duck-feeding-the-whole-class method so students can learn to use the language. Duck-feeding might make you feel content psychologically, thinking that you didn't waste a minute of class time, talking and talking the whole period. The students might be very satisfied, too, thinking that the teacher talked and explained the whole class period, didn't waste a minute, very diligent and responsible. But what is the actual outcome? Not much.

I always wanted to use a more communicative approach but didn't dare, worrying that my students might not do well in exams. Now through this training program, I think I'll try it when I go back. I feel that I have the capability to do so, with my understanding of the textbooks and my language ability. Now I want to try it. I'll try it to see what happens. I feel quite inspired. The quality of my students is pretty good. Also, students' capability is elastic. If you try hard to train them, they will learn.

Researcher: I think there is very little difference in intelligence among children.

Teacher 1: You are right. We've learned a lot at this training. We are from many different schools. When we go back, I'm sure a lot of what we learned will gradually filter through to our teaching practice.

Researcher: Do you think the junior teachers from remote country areas might have difficulties?

Teacher 1: This training program was short. In fact the most serious problem with education in Qinghai is the poor quality of the teachers. We're senior teachers and we don't have many opportunities to get in-service training. So those less qualified teachers need even more training. But because they are very busy, they can't go. Take the teachers in this training class for example, how many of us can actually communicate in English? Very few. This is **the** problem we face. Is it possible to demand that students learn to communicate in English when the teachers can't? Therefore, the quality of the teachers - their language ability, their level of competence in their area of expertise - needs to be addressed first.

Researcher: This training program was about teaching methodologies. do you think we should have included language training as well?

Teachers 1 & 2: Yes, absolutely.

Researcher: Which ideas and activities from the workshops do you think are not possible to use? Why?

Teacher 2: We'd sort of heard of the methods introduced by the consultants. While they are inspiring to our thinking about language teaching, our biggest problem is that our classes are huge. If we use some of these methods, and can't manage very well, the class will become chaotic, and the effect would be even worse than using a traditional approach like lecturing the whole class. Some methods take time and a lot of training to implement.

Teacher 1: You must use English from the very beginning. We have a new teacher in our school who is four-year trained. He insisted on using English in class from the beginning, closely following the Five-Step method advocated in the new Junior textbooks. He's doing very well now. His classes are in Junior Three this year and they have been trained very well. It was probably quite difficult and slow for him and the students in the beginning, but he stuck to the Five-Step teaching method. When the students get used to concepts like "group work", "role-play" and so on, they become more cooperative and more active in class. It does take time to train them to that stage, but they will eventually be familiar with the idea.

Teacher 2: It won't take the whole first term.

Teacher 1: It won't be difficult if you follow the Five-Step method.

Teacher 2: In the end, it is still a matter of the teachers' language ability and beliefs in language teaching. The atmosphere of a school is also very important. We chatted with the EMS teachers. Here they have to work extra hard because if you can't produce good test results, it just won't do. Everybody knows that.

Researcher: So in the end, the aim is still to get high scores in the exams?

Teacher 2: Yes, it is.

Teacher 1: We'll have to change. When we go back, let us who participated in this training set an example for the others. Maybe in a few years' time, things will be better.

Teacher 2: Yeah, we can speak English in class. It's just that there are no such requirements for teachers so the effort to speak English just lapsed. It's so easy to do less.

Researcher: So does this mean that is no method that is impossible to practice?

Teachers 1 & 2: Yes. All are possible. It's only a matter of to what degree, how much and how often you use, or if you are willing, if you care enough. It is up to the teacher.

May: Going back to the exams, do you think there are conflicts between the exams, the textbooks and the teaching methods?

Teacher 1: At the moment the exams are still on the old textbooks, so there is no contradiction. The new books and new methods from next year will definitely force the exams to change, otherwise the whole thing won't be coordinated. Because the old way is to learn theories about language and prepare for exams, and the new way is to learn practical things and communicate in the language, there will be conflicts. The State Education Commission will surely consider this and there will be change.

Teacher 2: I think so. But the moment, it is still all about exams. We teach for exams. We follow the baton of exam requirements.

Researcher: Is it possible that some students' ability to communicate in English is pretty good but can't pass exams?

Teacher 2: Yes, it is like that with some students.

Teacher 1: The National Entrance Exams, we can't do away with it though, because we have too many people. We have to use it to select good students. Still, I suppose, you have to admit the exams are restricting students' actual potential.

Researcher: Are they restricting teachers' potential?

Teacher 1: Yes, they are. You tend to teach what they require. But I think students are disadvantaged if they don't learn listening and speaking skills. Developing all four skills gives students long-term benefit. They might not be better off in the exams, but they'll demonstrate their language ability later on, say, in the university, if not in Senior Three.

Researcher: I agree with you. Our next question is do you feel ready to train others to teach more communicatively?

Teachers 1 & 2: Yes, with good preparations, I think I have the ability. We'll adapt some of the materials to the situation in Qinghai. There shouldn't be any problem.

Researcher: What do you think of the way the workshops were conducted? How would you rate these out of 10: lecturing, group work, practical activities and lesson demonstrations?

Teacher 22: It's difficult to say. The time was too short. They are all useful. It depends on your purpose really.

Researcher: Would you like to make any suggestions for future training programs?

Teacher 1: There should be more demonstration classes. First lecture on teaching methods, then demonstrate the methods in actual teaching, then discuss the whole session accordingly. It will be more effective this way.

Teacher 2: I think the training program should be longer. Fifteen days are too short.

Teacher 1: Trainees should be streamed into different groups according to their language ability. The better qualified teachers should be trained in teaching methods and theories. The poorly qualified ones should start with understanding the school textbooks.

Teacher 2: It shouldn't be during the school holidays. If this training had been in April and May when the students were here, we could have benefited from sitting in lectures on theories and then observing EMS teachers teaching their students. I think this would have been more helpful for us.

Teacher 1: It is like doing school practice, with each classroom teacher supervising a trainee teacher. Because a lot of things such as teaching techniques, strategies are difficult to put into words. They are difficult to explain. You have to observe how teachers do it in class. Some really experienced teachers perform spontaneously. A lot of their spectacular teaching performances are not planned. You have to observe to learn how they do it. Also, a lot of naturally good teachers can't explain what good methods and strategies they use.

Teacher 2: I think training programs should be a combination of theories and practical work. Integrate the theories with the textbooks we have to teach, with our actual reality in mind. The training this time, the emphasis was not clear. Was it theory? Or practical work? We don't know.

Researcher: Going back to the reality. What percentage of time do you think teachers in Qinghai allocate for the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing?

Teachers 1 & 2: In the senior school, reading and writing are 50% each. None for listening and speaking because there are no sentence patterns or dialogues to practice in the textbooks. There are only short articles, texts. So we read the texts and explain the grammar. That's what we are required to do.

Researcher: We talked about a more communicative approach, how do you understand it? I mean what does it mean by a "communicative approach"?

Teacher 1: It means to actually use the language you've learned in real life. It means language has to be in a context, in a situation. For example, greeting, saying good-bye, etc.

Teacher 2: I agree.

Researcher: Does it include all four skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing?

Teacher 2: No, it doesn't seem to include reading. Reading just means reading articles, reading texts in books. Communication should be in a conversation.

**** We stopped here as the teachers had to go.**

Researcher: Thank you very much for talking to me.

Teachers: You are welcome.

(The end of interview transcripts)

Appendix III:

Program Evaluation Questionnaire:

Curriculum area: _____

Scale:

1	2	3	4	5
very poor	average	good	very good	excellent

Part 1. Please rate the following using the above scale:

Written Materials:

1. provided by the international consultant(IC) ( )
2. provided by the local consultants(LCs) ( )
3. provided by the EMS trainers ( )

Effectiveness of training in helping raise the standard of education in ethnic minority areas:

4. the IC's sessions ( )
5. the LCs' sessions ( )
6. the EMS trainers' sessions ( )

7. Learning activities and teaching approaches introduced by the IC ( )

Analysis of the textbooks and suggestions on teaching methods

8. by the LCs ( )
9. by the EMS trainers ( )

10. the degree to which training contents and style(s) stimulate the trainees ( )
11. the availability of video facilities during the training( )
12. the classroom condition and environment in which training was conducted ( )
13. the accommodation provided for the trainees ( )
14. the food during the training ( )
15. the ability of interpreters ( )
16. the organising of the training program ( )
17. the hospitality arrangements for trainees in Beijing ( )
18. the degree to which the training was successful ( )

Part 2. Please write down your responses to the following:

1. What have you learned most during this training?
2. Which aspect(s)/part(s) of the training were you most interested in?

3. What suggestions and recommendations do you have for future such training programs?

Appendix IV:
Trainee responses to the three questions in Part 2 of Program Evaluation:

1. What have you learned most during this training?

- teaching methods.
- how to organise lessons; how to teach the new textbooks; how to teach words in context.
- eye-opening methods; how to teach new textbooks; how to organise activities.
- EMS teachers' demonstration lessons; audio-visual teaching; the trainers' dedication to their work.
- understanding the new textbooks; teaching methods.
- new teaching methods and new outlooks about teaching.
- new methods; how to design lessons; how to motivate students.
- new approaches to teaching.
- new teaching methods and information.
- background of the new textbooks; education reform; trainers' dedication to work.
- how to prepare for exams.
- the communicative approach; analysis of the new textbooks.
- the communicative approach.
- trainers' dedication and responsible attitude to work.
- getting to know other teachers from different regions in Qinghai; new teaching methods and trainers' dedication to work.
- teaching methods using the new junior textbooks.
- an eye-opening experience.
- new teaching methods.

2. Which part(s) / aspect(s) of the training were you most interested in?

- EMS teachers' demonstrations; the LC's analysis of the syllabus.
- new teaching methods and approaches.
- how to teach the new textbooks by the LC Liu Daoyi.
- talking with the Australians; learning more English; Liu Daoyi's session on textbook reform in China.
- EMS teachers' opportunities to study abroad in English speaking countries.
- communicative teaching approach; the 4 skills of language teaching.
- as above.
- as above.
- EMS teachers' dedication to their work; the privileges and advantages enjoyed by Beijing students in terms of Entrance Exams.
- the good environment in Beijing; the facilities they have;

teaching methods.
- good facilities in Beijing schools.
- the enthusiasm of students in a good environment.
- matching the exams with the new textbooks; looking for a method specifically suitable for remote and minority areas
- Liu Daoyi's analysis of the new textbooks.
- the gap between schools in urban and rural areas; new teaching approaches introduced by the foreign consultant.
- teaching activities.
- new teaching methods; EMS teachers' hardworking spirit.
- teaching methods; analysis of textbooks and syllabus.

3. What suggestions do you have for future teaching training programs?

- training time should be longer and during semester; should be more practical.
- more discussions needed on education in remote and mountain areas; the key questions is: How to improve the standard of education in remote areas where condition is poor and facilities scarce? This training program should also have organised visits to other schools in Beijing.
- more focus on teaching methods in remote and minority areas.
- more practical-how to apply the theories into practice.
- accommodation should have been better; more detailed training materials.
- should train more Junior Schoo! and Senior One teachers, as well as language co-ordinators.
- the training should have been conducted in schools in remote areas - it would be more relevant.
- should be more relevant; should have demonstrated the lessons with students with poorer English or problem students - show how they are taught and managed in class.
- all trainers should have visited schools in Qinghai and training should have been carried out in Qinghai as more teachers could have been trained this way.
- more programs like this are needed.
- should be more relevant and practical; this training should have taken place during semester time so we could observe EMS teachers' actual teaching.
- If all trainers could go to train teachers in Qinghai, the outcome would be even better.

(The end)